PEDAGOGICAL SCIENCES

Olena Martynyuk
Khmelnytskyi National University, Khmelnytskyi, Ukraine
ORCID iD: 0000-0002-8973-5876

ENHANCING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN UNIVERSITIES VIA COLLABORATIVE ONLINE INTERNATIONAL LEARNING

Abstract. The paper explores Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) as an innovative approach to developing intercultural communication competence. Using a qualitative-analytical methodology and drawing on constructivist learning, collaborative learning and intercultural communicative competence theories, the study examines COIL's conceptual foundations, implementation practices, benefits and challenges in Ukraine and abroad. The findings highlight COIL's potential to integrate disciplinary learning with intercultural awareness, communication, teamwork and digital literacy while expanding access to international educational experiences without physical mobility.
Keywords: higher education, COIL, virtual exchange, internationalization, intercultural communicative competence, project, team work.

Introduction. Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is an innovative approach to internationalizing higher education that enables students from different countries to engage in structured online collaboration through jointly designed courses and projects. By overcoming some limitations of traditional academic mobility, COIL expands access to international learning opportunities while fostering intercultural competence, communication skills, cultural awareness and global perspectives.

This study aims to examine COIL's conceptual foundations, key characteristics, implementation practices in the United States, some European countries and Ukraine, as well as its pedagogical benefits and challenges. Its theoretical framework integrates constructivist learning theory, collaborative learning theory and intercultural communicative competence theory, emphasizing the importance of interaction, peer cooperation and cultural understanding in knowledge construction and the development of transferable skills.

Results. The concept of COIL originated at the State University of New York (SUNY) in 2006. The subsequent establishment of the SUNY COIL Center supported the development and dissemination of this approach (SUNY COIL Center, n.d.; Rubin, 2017). Although initially developed in the United States, COIL gradually attracted interest in Europe through the expansion of the SUNY COIL Global Network. Its growing recognition was reflected in presentations at conferences organized by the European Association for International Education. Another significant milestone was the first European COIL conference, held at The Hague University of Applied Sciences in 2016. The event brought together experienced practitioners and newcomers, facilitating knowledge exchange and the establishment of international partnerships (The Hague Online, 2016).

Several developments have contributed to COIL's worldwide expansion. First, universities have recognized that traditional international mobility programs reach only

a limited proportion of students. Virtual collaboration offers an alternative for those unable to study or undertake internships abroad. Second, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of online and blended learning, demonstrating the potential of digital environments to sustain international academic cooperation. Third, concerns about the environmental consequences of international travel, particularly carbon emissions, have encouraged institutions to consider more sustainable forms of internationalization (Nikula et al., 2022; Shields, 2019).

COIL is associated with Virtual Exchange (VE), a broader concept encompassing various forms of online international learning (O'Dowd, 2021). However, the terms are not entirely interchangeable. COIL specifically emphasizes structured, curriculum-based collaboration between students whose instructors jointly design and deliver learning activities. Other virtual exchange formats may involve international communication without sustained teamwork or shared academic outcomes. COIL should therefore be understood as a distinct pedagogical approach within the broader field of virtual exchange.

Successful COIL implementation requires systematic planning and careful coordination of educational activities. Course design involves determining learning methods, collaborative tasks, schedules, team structures, participant roles, scaffolding strategies, facilitation techniques and assessment criteria (Hackett et al., 2023). Constructive alignment is particularly important because it ensures consistency between intended learning outcomes, teaching activities and assessment methods (Kirschner et al., 2022). Such alignment makes international collaboration an integral part of the curriculum rather than an additional activity disconnected from academic objectives.

COIL typically involves instructors from at least two higher education institutions in different countries who jointly design and deliver a course or project. Activities may last several weeks or extend across an entire semester (SUNY COIL Center, 2020). Students work in international teams to investigate research questions, solve shared problems and produce outcomes such as reports, presentations, or educational resources. These tasks frequently involve interdisciplinary cooperation and encourage students to approach issues from different academic and cultural perspectives.

Communication combines synchronous interaction through scheduled online meetings with asynchronous exchanges using email, messaging applications, and collaborative platforms. This flexibility is particularly valuable when participants operate in different time zones or follow different academic calendars. COIL projects commonly progress through several stages: initial activities establish communication and trust through introductions, icebreakers, and cultural discussions; subsequent tasks involve intensive teamwork, problem-solving and knowledge construction; and final activities encourage reflection on collaboration and intercultural learning. Collaboration scripts can clarify responsibilities, interaction patterns, and time allocation, thereby supporting effective teamwork (Hackett et al., 2024).

Through these activities, students develop disciplinary knowledge alongside communication, teamwork, digital collaboration and intercultural competencies. Intercultural communication competence involves understanding one's own culture and other cultural perspectives, interpreting differences, listening actively and demonstrating openness and respect (Hackett et al., 2024). Assessment generally includes group and individual components. Group evaluation focuses on shared

products, such as reports and presentations, while individual assessment may involve reflective assignments documenting personal contributions and learning experiences. Participation in online sessions and collaborative activities may also be considered. Although COIL can operate as an extracurricular initiative, the absence of academic credit or formal assessment may reduce student engagement. Integrating it into institutional curricula promotes wider participation and ensures that international learning is not restricted to already motivated students or those with previous international experience.

The United States remains a leader in COIL implementation, with universities integrating it into education, business, engineering, healthcare, language studies and the social sciences. Projects may be fully online, blended, or incorporated into face-to-face courses. Organizations such as the American Council on Education (ACE) and the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) recognize COIL as an effective means of promoting global learning and international cooperation.

Florida International University (FIU) provides a prominent example of institutional development. Following the launch of its first COIL courses in 2017, the university established an Office of Collaborative Online International Learning in 2021. By that year, FIU had implemented 104 COIL courses involving more than 5,000 students from the United States and international partner institutions. Its projects address sustainability, intercultural communication and international cooperation, while professional development workshops and leadership programs support educators. In 2024, FIU received the Institute of International Education Andrew Heiskell Award for expanding access to international education through COIL (Florida International University, n.d.).

Other American institutions demonstrate COIL's adaptability. Since 2014, the University of Washington has supported faculty through training, fellowships and financial assistance. Its projects develop multicultural teamwork and digital literacy while addressing global challenges such as climate change, misinformation, migration and technological transformation (University of Washington, n.d.). The University of Alabama participated in the ACE U.S.–Japan COIL Initiative with Chiba University, jointly developing nursing and education courses that enabled students to compare healthcare systems, educational practices and cultural perspectives (University of Alabama, n.d.). Ohio State University also promotes COIL through projects lasting approximately five to ten weeks, emphasizing equitable participation, intercultural communication and teamwork to prepare students for the global labour market (Ohio State University, n.d.).

European universities have increasingly incorporated COIL into their internationalization strategies. The Netherlands has become an important centre for virtual exchange, partly because English-medium teaching facilitates international cooperation. Utrecht University has developed partnerships with institutions in the United States, Egypt, Canada, Germany, India and other countries. Its projects address global health, sustainable fashion, crime and community wellbeing, social work, and responsible management, frequently connecting academic learning with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Utrecht University, n.d.).

In the United Kingdom, Nottingham Trent University has implemented COIL projects across business, fashion, social work, public health, biosciences and criminal

justice. Examples include Design Culture and Identity, developed with the Fashion Institute of Technology; Crime and Community Wellness, conducted with Humber College; and Tackling Global Health Challenges, implemented with New Mansoura University. These initiatives use online workshops, teamwork, presentations and project-based learning to explore sustainability, healthcare, leadership and community wellbeing (Nottingham Trent University, n.d.).

The University of Glasgow regards COIL as a form of virtual mobility and internationalization at home. It emphasizes integrating COIL into credit-bearing courses rather than relying exclusively on extracurricular participation. Institutional guidance assists educators with course design, assessment, technology and intercultural learning outcomes. The university also provides interdisciplinary case studies and supports staff in establishing international partnerships through its Pathways to COIL initiative (University of Glasgow, n.d.). This example demonstrates the importance of institutional support for sustainable implementation.

In Ukraine, COIL has developed more recently but is increasingly used to expand international learning opportunities. Universities including Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Sumy State University, Uzhhorod National University and Khmelnytskyi National University have established collaborative initiatives with international partners in language education, pedagogy, economics and international relations.

Sumy State University began implementing COIL in 2019 through cooperation with the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. By 2024, it had conducted approximately twenty projects involving more than fifty academic staff members and nearly 800 students. These initiatives covered management, law, philology, journalism, engineering, medicine and other disciplines, illustrating COIL's adaptability to diverse academic contexts (Sumy State University, n.d.).

Khmelnytskyi National University has also developed several international projects. Advising and Helping Skills in Student Affairs, organized with the University of South Florida, brought Ukrainian and American students together in mixed teams to conduct research and prepare digital presentations. Another initiative, Moving Minds: International Business, conducted in partnership with UCLL University of Applied Sciences in Belgium, involved more than 180 students from Ukraine and Belgium and focused on intercultural communication, language development, and global business practices. The project Breaking Borders: International Business, Trade & Wellbeing Across Cultures brought together 176 students and educators from Ukraine, the Netherlands, Belgium and Denmark. Participants explored international trade, global economic processes, cultural diversity and social wellbeing through lectures, workshops, discussions and collaborative projects. They also produced short documentary films examining real-life cases and comparing cultural perspectives on economics, trade, and wellbeing (Khmelnytskyi National University, n.d.). This initiative illustrates how COIL integrates academic learning, digital production, teamwork, and intercultural reflection.

The comparative analysis identifies several defining characteristics of COIL. First, it requires collaboration between instructors from higher education institutions in different countries who jointly develop and implement learning activities. Second, it combines disciplinary knowledge with intercultural awareness, communication and

collaborative skills. Its structured activities promote active participation, interdependence, individual accountability, teamwork and reflection. Unlike informal virtual exchanges, COIL is generally integrated into formal curricula and includes assessment or academic credit. Its disciplinary flexibility allows implementation across different fields and through interdisciplinary projects, typically lasting several weeks, often within a four-to-fifteen-week period.

COIL also represents an embedded and sustainable approach to internationalization because it can be incorporated into compulsory and elective courses without requiring physical mobility. It broadens access to international educational experiences, reduces travel-related financial barriers, and may limit the environmental impact of international exchange.

Conclusions. The study identifies four principal benefits of COIL: enhanced intercultural competence and global awareness; improved communication, teamwork and digital collaboration; broader access to international learning; and greater integration of digital technologies into education. However, implementation may be complicated by differences in academic calendars and curricula, unequal technological access, varying language proficiency and insufficient faculty training. Effective course design, constructive alignment, appropriate assessment, and sustained institutional support are therefore essential. The study concludes that COIL offers substantial potential for modernizing higher education, strengthening international partnerships, promoting inclusive, accessible and sustainable international collaboration.

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